

Changing the Meaning of A Dog's Life

Bau Beach Is the Place To Be For Dogs that Just Want To Have Fun in the Sun — Followed By a Massage

By Laura Collura
ITALY DAILY SEVEN

When my beagle Teo set paw on the beach for the first time, he rushed ahead raising a huge cloud of sand, then raised his leg on a sunbathing blonde's chaise-longue and finally took a dive into the pool with a loud splash.

Instead of being screamed at for his rowdy behavior, Teo got a pat on the head, a crunchy snack and a bowl of fresh water.

That's because, lucky dog that he is, he wasn't spending the day at any old Italian beach, where dogs are officially banned and sometimes reluctantly tolerated. No, Teo was vacationing at his species' favorite joint: the Bau Beach of Maccarese, some 20 kilometers north-west of Rome.

In a country where the law forbids canine sea-lovers from spending time on beaches side by side with human beings, the Bau — or "woof" the way Italian dogs say it — came as a god-send for many.

"Since I found Zara on a street three years ago, she and I have been the victims of endless episodes of discrimination. Here, instead, we feel at home," said Silvia Tosti, a Rome physician who takes her friend, whom she describes as "a purebred mutt," to the Bau Beach every time she can. While Zara plays with her barking friends and swims — activities, Ms. Tosti said, which are "good for her health" — her owner can rent a deck-chair and an umbrella, buy an ice-cream at the gazebo or eat a dish of spaghetti and clams at the bordering "Marechiaro" restaurant.

Like Ms. Tosti and Zara, many dog-loving families feel that life for them is not so easy in Italy — especially in the summer. While most hotels and resorts forbid vacationers from taking dogs and cats, finding a reliable, cheap pension for the pets is a difficult task. As a result, recent estimates indicate that each year some 350,000 pets — 150,000 dogs and 200,000 cats — are abandoned.

The Italian chapter of the People for

the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the PETA, said Wednesday that the number of abandoned pets has dropped by 30 percent in the first five months of 2000 compared to the same period in 1999. Still, that means that 100,000 pets lost a home between January and May. Those that survive normally end up in decrepit dog-pounds.

Patrizia Daffinà, who runs the Bau Beach with the help of her husband Giovanni and her sister Francesca, has made improving the life of dogs her life mission. "I used to have a real job, I was a screenplay writer," she said from her home in Maccarese, where she lives with Giovanni, 13 cats and six dogs. "But since I started working with the Bau Beach, dogs have taken over my whole life."

At the Bau, dogs are not only welcome — they are treated like serious customers.

"Our aim is to give people who have chosen to share their lives with one or more dogs the same rights as those who haven't," Ms. Daffinà said. "And

we do all we can for the dogs' well-being."

Upon arrival, humans escorting the guests are handed a water bowl, a smaller dish containing a "biological" snack, a shovel to scoop up after the dog if nature calls, and a small umbrella with special hooks for leashes.

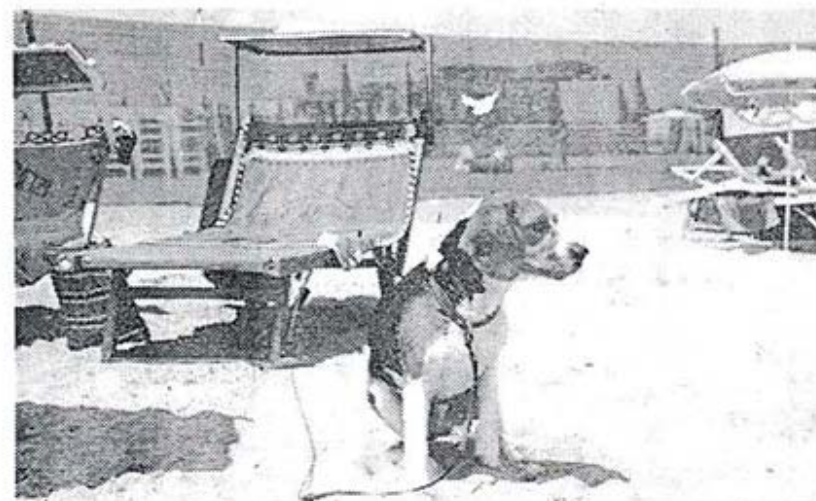
If, like Teo, your dog dislikes stooping to convention, you might want to secure the leash to your deck-chair or you'll find yourself chasing dog, leash and umbrella around the beach.

Dogs are allowed to roam freely on the beach and — a true rarity in Italy — to bathe in the sea as much as they like.

For dogs seeking more secluded entertainment, the beach also features a fenced-in playpen equipped with a pool and specially built showers where the furry guests can wash up — more or less willingly — after a day spent rolling in the sand.

Before leaving, dogs might need a sprinkle of anti-flea spray — and

'Our aim is to give those who have chosen to share their lives with a dog the same rights as those who haven't.'



that's on the house, too.

For extra cash, instead, human guests can get a Shiatsu massage from one of the young professionals roaming the beach. Those who truly believe in equal rights can dish out some more money and buy their pet a nice backrub, too — if the animal is willing to brave it, the masseurs won't shrink from the task.

To alleviate the tedium of tracking down inns that accept dogs, the Bau Beach has struck up a deal with a local hotel, the "Miraggio" in Fregene, a nearby resort where Rome-based celebrities are known to hang out.

"We give Bau Beach clients a discount," said Susanna Santerini, the hotel manager. "Bed and breakfast in a double room will cost them 100,000 lire instead of 140,000."

The Bau Beach provides its canine guests with insurance coverage and guarantees the availability of a veterinary doctor on short notice. Each Sunday, dogs with behavioral problems can also see the resident shrink who, Ms. Daffinà swore, has been known to "do wonders" with turbulent pets.

The Bau is open to all, except overly aggressive dogs, for whom the beach is strictly off limits.

"We had some problems with belliscose dogs at first," said Ms. Tosti, the owner of Zara. "Now that they keep them out, we're all better off."

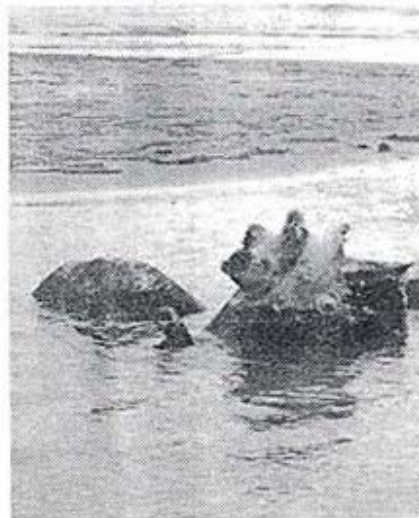
This year, the Bau has also embarked on the ambitious project of saving as many abandoned dogs as possible, promoting "adoption" days. The Marechiaro restaurant and the ice-cream gazebo, which prosper thanks to Bau Beach patrons, donate ten percent of their proceeds to help finance the project.

The first test-run of this initiative was on Sunday, June 11, when ten lonely dogs found a new family. "It went so well that we've decided to devote every weekend to adoptions," Ms. Daffinà said.

So now each Saturday and Sunday, stray dogs in dire need of a home will be at the Bau, impatiently waiting for someone to adopt them. The orphans, Ms. Daffinà explained, come from the municipal pound or from



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local holding centers, where they are often cooped up in small, unhealthy pens. Part of the money from Marechiaro and the ice-cream shop goes to buy food and medicines for the unfortunate dogs stuck in those centers, Ms. Daffinà said.

That's why saving a handful of dogs each weekend is not enough for Ms. Daffinà. Her dream, she said, is to build a real reservation for abandoned dogs in the area. "The project is already complete," she said. "My sister Francesca, who is an architect, drew it up. We have also located the area to build it on. What we need now is a permit and funds. That's why we want people to be aware of the problem of abandoned dogs."

The Bau is the second beach establishment open to dogs in Italy. The national trailblazer is an elegant